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ABSTRACT

This study examined developmental differences in rates of victimization by community violence and associated coping processes in 123 sixth, seventh and eighth graders from a parochial school in a small Connecticut city. Subjects completed the Youth's Exposure to Community Violence questionnaire and the Ways of Coping questionnaire. Results indicated that the majority of subjects experienced at least one incident of victimization within the past year, including hitting, chasing, mugging, or wounding. Victims reported more use of each coping process than nonvictims, reflecting emotion-based (self-control, escape avoidance) and problem-based efforts (confrontative coping, planful problem solving, positive reappraisal, accepting responsibility). Results suggest that the experience of being a victim of community violence pushes students to try new strategies to cope with the stress of the incident. (JPB)

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Running Head: Coping

The Effects of Victimization on Coping Processes in Suburban Early Adolescents

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Abstract

Developmental differences in rates of victimization and associated coping processes were examined in early adolescents from a small suburban city. The majority of participants experienced at least one incident of victimization within the past year. Victimization was associated with increased use of several coping processes.

The Effects of Victimization on Coping Processes in Suburban Early Adolescents

Although growing segments of the adolescent population are facing a crisis of violence in their communities, research on the effects of community violence has largely been limited to exposure rates and measures of clinical distress, and has not adequately addressed adaptational responses (Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1993; Martinez & Richters, 1993). As part of a larger study on suburban adolescents experience with and reaction to victimization (Kuther & Fisher, 1996), this poster examines the relationship of coping processes to victimization.

Method

Participants

One-hundred and twenty-three 6th, 7th, and 8th graders (56% female) from a private parochial school in a small Connecticut city, approximately 50 miles from New York City, participated. Students were predominantly NonHispanic White; 8.3% described themselves as African American, 2.5% Asian American, and 2.5% Native American.

Measures

Youth's Exposure to Community Violence Questionnaire. As part of a larger study on community violence (Kuther & Fisher, 1996), we developed the Youth's Exposure to Community Violence Questionnaire, adapted from Richter and Saltzman (1990) to assess student experiences with victimization. This questionnaire assesses student experiences with four categories of violent events: being chased or threatened; being hit, slapped, punched or jumped; being mugged or robbed; and being seriously wounded.

Ways of Coping Questionnaire. Students also completed the Ways of Coping Questionnaire, which contains eight empirical subscales to assess coping strategies: confrontative coping, distancing, self-controlling, seeking social support, accepting responsibility, escape-avoidance, planful problem solving, and positive reappraisal (Folkman & Lazarus, 1989). Participants imagine a recent stressful situation (not necessarily associated with victimization) and indicate on a scale ranging from "not used" to "used a great deal" how often they used 66 potential solutions in dealing with the situation.

Results

Descriptive analyses indicated that the majority of students experienced at least one incident of victimization within the past year. Across grades, the percent of students reporting an incident were: hitting (59%; range = 24 - 51%); chasing (42%; range = 54 - 65%); mugging (18%; range = 12 - 23%); and wounding (12%; range = 0 - 19%). Students did not differ in their likelihood of victimization on the basis of grade, $X^2(2, N = 118) = 1.346$, NS. Table 1 provides the mean frequencies for student victimization. As there were no grade differences in victimization, grade was dropped from subsequent analyses.

A 2(sex) by 2(victimization) MANOVA with coping subscales as the dependant variables revealed an overall main effect of victim status, $F(8, 97) = 2.23$, $p < .0318$. Univariate tests indicated that victims reported more use of self control, $F(1, 104) = 13.47$, $p < .0004$, accepting responsibility, $F(1, 104) = 13.91$, $p < .0003$, planful problem solving, $F(1, 104) = 7.17$, $p < .0086$, confrontative coping, $F(1, 104) = 5.63$, $p < .0195$, escape avoidance, $F(1, 104) = 6.76$, $p < .0107$, and positive reappraisal, $F(1, 104) = 5.38$, $p < .0223$. Student mean coping scores by

sex and victimization are presented in Table 2.

Discussion

Over half of our sample of suburban early adolescents reported victimization by community violence. Victimization was associated with a variety of coping responses. Victims reported more use of each coping process than nonvictims, reflecting emotion-based (self-control; escape-avoidance) as well as problem-based (confrontative coping, planful problem solving; positive reappraisal; accepting responsibility) efforts. It is suggested that the experience of victimization pushes students to try new strategies, positive and negative, in order to cope with the stress.

While the coping strategies most utilized by victims appear to contradict one another in that they include both emotion based and problem based strategies. Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen (1986) have argued that such seemingly contradictory coping processes can act to facilitate one another, depending upon the situation at hand. For example, while confrontative coping refers to aggressive efforts to confront, or change the situation, self control refers to efforts directed at controlling one's emotions and actions. The occurrence of the two processes together suggests that the impulse to confront may, for some, be coupled with that to control one's feelings and actions so that the situation does not get out of hand (Folkman et al., 1986).

Victim scores on the accepting responsibility subscale of the coping measure indicated that they were more likely to accept responsibility and acknowledge their role in the problem, which may be adaptive in guiding future behavior. However, it may also suggest an increased likelihood for victims to blame themselves for circumstances out of their control. Increased use of positive

reappraisal in our sample of victimized teens suggests that many approach incidents such as victimization as a learning or growth experience. This dimension of coping also taps religious faith (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988), suggesting that victims may have turned towards their religious faith in order to cope with the experience. This interpretation may be especially appropriate as our sample consisted of students from a private parochial school.

These results suggest the need to examine youth's perception of victimization in more depth, as how adolescents perceive or appraise the incident may be related to coping. Victims reported more use of escape-avoidance strategies, which are often used in situations appraised as unchangeable, or having to be accepted (Folkman et al., 1986). They also reported more use of planful problem solving, or analytic problem-focused efforts to change the situation; this strategy is most often used in situations appraised as changeable (Folkman et al., 1986). The increased use of escape avoidance and planful problem solving efforts in victimized teens suggests that they were ambiguous in their appraisals of their situations. Future research should further examine how early adolescents appraise situations and whether victimization affects their appraisals.

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Table 1

Percent of Students Victimized During the Past Year by Sex, Grade, and Type of Event

Event	Male (n = 51)	Female (n = 67)	6th grade (n = 33)	7th grade (n = 42)	8th grade (n = 43)	Total[1] (n = 118)
Chase	57%	30%	24%	51%	47%	42%
Slap	71%	51%	59%	53%	65%	59%
Mug	25%	12%	12%	16%	23%	18%
Wound	18%	7%	0%	14%	19%	12%

1. Three participants were not included in these analyses because of missing data.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Student Coping Scores by Sex and Victimization

	Victim						NonVictim					
	Female		Male		Total		Female		Male		Total	
Coping Scale	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)	Mean	(sd)
Confrontative	8.17	4.10	7.94	.45	8.06	4.25	6.61	3.06	4.14	5.73	6.00	5.79
Distancing	6.57	3.75	7.18	3.97	6.86	3.84	6.14	2.33	4.71	4.75	5.79	3.07
Self-Controlling	8.48	4.47	8.58	4.98	8.53	4.69	5.24	3.88	3.57	4.79	4.82	4.10
Seeking Support	7.62	3.70	7.11	4.47	7.38	4.07	6.19	3.22	4.71	5.02	5.82	3.70
Accepting Resp.	5.71	3.07	4.58	3.47	5.18	3.30	3.05	1.75	2.43	2.76	2.89	2.01
Escape-Avoidance	9.07	5.09	8.53	5.11	8.80	5.08	5.86	3.64	6.14	8.19	5.93	4.97
Plan. Prob. Solve	7.74	4.41	6.97	3.82	7.38	4.13	5.71	3.26	3.57	5.19	5.18	3.84
Pos. Reappraisal	8.79	4.83	8.32	5.10	8.56	4.93	6.62	4.08	5.00	5.29	6.21	4.37